

ALL TOGETHER NOW: GELITIN - PARTNERS IN CRIME

Once upon a time there was a summer camp somewhere in the late seventies where Wolfgang Gantner, Ali Janka, Florian Reither and Tobias Urban first met and became friends for life. In the early nineties the four presented themselves as the artists collective Gelitin and they have been living happily ever after.

The ideas, projects, performances, installations, sculptures, happenings, drawings, paintings, texts, videos and in fact their entire individual and collective lives, constantly balance between a stimulating, at times provocative genius and a childlike, almost affectionate enthusiasm. Often a single work holds the combination of both. While some ideas reflect large scale, almost megalomaniac thoughts ('scenic view drive', 'sheron go!! towers', 'styroporblock', ...), other projects, realized or not, have a contrastingly intimate character ('sortiersystem', 'rodeln', 'gläser', ...).

But no matter how diverse and insanely labyrinth like the actions and thoughts of Gelitin may be, the result remains a type of derailment, that makes you look at 'normality' in a different way. The ordinary changes into the extraordinary right before your very own eyes.



Untitled, 2010

42 x 27, 5 x 31 cm
stuffed creatures in
synthetic oil, preserving jar,
wooden lightbox

The most recent work is the installation (the group itself prefers to refer to it as sculpture) 'urine bladder - all together now' - version 2010. The idea is childlike and playful, the result spectacular. The visitor (m/f) is asked to pee in a urinal, the urine then runs through a transparent tube throughout the gallery and is collected in a colossal plastic bubble best described as an oval hot water bed. That (warm) bubble offers other visitors a seat, a lie-down, a wandering

moment or - why not - a moment to reflect on the sense and nonsense of life itself. However strange this installation may seem, it fits perfectly within the framework of actions and thoughts of the four artists. In 'urine bladder - all together now' as in any other work, the end result is jam-packed with joy and vitality.

In 2003 a first design emerged. But the original concept and the current version have several noteworthy differences. First a staircase in the pavilion (urinal) prevented the impression that a visitor was urinating down from a throne. What we see now is the reverse. The external staircase leads to a booth literally piercing the gallery roof and actually placing you above the world. There was even the idea of using plants and even a palm tree to keep things cosy. Other than that 'urine bladder - all together now' (2010) is no different from the concept described in detail now almost a decade ago. The question in all this is the question to be asked at every piece of authentic art: 'where does this come from'?

Gelitin: I think it is obvious ... We all need to pee, it is something omnipresent, a feeling we all know and we really wanted to use urine as a construction material. In fact, we always use the most normal things from our surroundings and turn them into objects or installations. Why not use urine, a material that otherwise would simply be wasted. We got the idea when we were in New York, walking and talking, thinking about an assignment we would be doing in the city and noticed that there were no public toilets anymore. That led to the idea of designing something where we could once more all share our urine.



That was the underlying idea, but how did you get to this design, this construction?

G: Actually, that came quite naturally. We wanted visitors of the gallery to share their pee with us, which required building something of an outhouse because no one in the public space wants to go to the toilet without any privacy. Men occasionally pee anywhere, but we wanted it to be accessible for everyone.

And what do you call the result? Is it a building, an installation? Or is it a type of collective performance of you and the audience?

G: First and foremost it is a sculpture. In a somewhat simplistic way we could call it a 'democratic sculpture'. The more people contribute to this sculpture, the more comfortable it becomes.

Is there any relation with the other artworks? This is obviously the centre piece, but in the other room we find a Gelitin version of the Mona Lisa.

G: We sparsely installed a few other artworks because without them the gallery would be too cold and we were aiming for a warm environment. Everyone prefers going to the toilet in a warm atmosphere, rather than a cold one, right?

Do you see yourself working in a certain tradition? There are other collectives of course, but what you do and how you do it, makes you rather unique in the art world ...

G: Bernini and his baroque sculptures is an example of an artist that we can relate to. We were in Berlin at a party, a 'golden shower party' where everyone urinates on each other. The setting was some sort of modernist fifties interior. Leather chairs, tight furniture. One person was giving another a blow job while he was throwing up. I mounted the two of them and peed on the couple and with that image I had a certain Bernini association, a son supporting his father. A type of whirlwind, or spiral sculpture. A bit far-fetched perhaps, but that was really an image that came to my mind. But there are also completely different references. There is also that strong image of Valie Export where her trousers have holes in them so you can see her vagina ... You know, we are bombarded with interesting images, much more so than a hundred years ago. Of course these images influence us, make us consciously or subconsciously use the images we have stored in our minds, but I would not go as far as to say that we have been influenced by Duchamp - though of course every modern day artist has in one way or another been influenced by Duchamp. There is so much that influences us. There is Catholicism, some pop songs or comic books ...

Is it also some kind of reaction against the deadly seriousness often found in the art world?

G: Not so much. We do not react against but to something. In the bigger picture you might say that the art world is in dire need of some air, a little less conceit. Just look at the Viennese Aktionisten ... You might say they did not have a sense of humour at all, but that does not mean we react against that because we happen to be from Vienna as well. We are also very politically active, yet without reacting to everyday politics. We couldn't care less if so and so were President, it will be someone else tomorrow anyway.

A journalist from the NY Post called you nonsensical performers and empty-headed posers. Can you relate to that? You might of course see it as a war-name, a compliment.

G: Very often we find that people who hate our work understand it much better than those who love it. Or more on the edge, they understand the purpose better and that is exactly why they hate it. But to love and to hate can be done for the same reason. We received this 'compliment' at the occasion of 'bunter abend' (2007), a performance we put on at Deitch Projects. You had a group of art lovers coming to a festive book presentation followed by a dinner. Above the table we built a sculpture, a wooden stage where we held a fun performance and to which all those present reacted ecstatically and positively. But since we were rather naked in that space, that journalist was talking about 'the New Decadence'.

When do you consider an exhibit or one of your performances as a success? You have already stated that people who hate your work, possibly have a sharper view.

G: In fact it is a success if it is a good idea. Take this gallery here for instance. Should there be a line of people outside waiting to pee and contribute to the sculpture, that would of course be a success. But even when no one pees, it can still be a success. We may have made a sculpture with a purpose, but aside from that function we aimed at making a strong image that appeals to the imagination. Another thing we want is to create works that make you see and think differently. It would be great if from now on you would get up in the morning, go to the toilet and think of this work. That is more important to us than the number of visitors that will actually go up the ladder and do his or her little business.

What does your work method look like? Take for example that large show at the Musée de l'art Moderne, 'La Louvre', that you made. There was an army of friends and acquaintances of yours making it look more like a film set with several directors than an artists' collective.

G: That came about quite organically, amorphously. We had more difficulty keeping the museum personnel in their offices for they were meddling in our affairs far too heavily. It was of key importance to us to create an atmosphere that allowed everyone to be relaxed and do whatever he or she liked. What we did was indicate where we were heading, provide ideas, that type of thing. Of course we did not jump in to 'La Louvre' without an idea. Working in a museum for six weeks with so many people, you need to have a sense of direction, but still ... Take something that at the surface is extremely trivial such as eating together. We made sure a friend of ours would provide good catering. But you know, we are not that different from traditional artists. Ask an artist before his canvas what he wants to do and he will also be able to bring the not yet visual image to mind.

You work in the public space, now in a gallery. How does that determine the result?

G: The space is very determining. This installation, for example, could not possibly be shown in a public space. But another determining factor is who you make the art with. We sometimes have an idea for a work or a performance which is then shelved for years until a moment comes along where everything fits together: the space, the initiator of the project, the participants. Coming back to this installation, it is an idea that had been ripening for years, from 2003 to

be exact. But then there is this space that finally co-determines the outcome. And there are many more ideas and plans we keep as little secrets. Can we keep them on our shelf just a little longer?

Interview: Jos Van den Bergh, 8-12-2010, Tim Van Laere Gallery, Antwerp



Untitled, 2010

70 x 49,8 cm

watercolor, pencil on paper